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TAGS: PGOV PREL KISL ASEC KPAO SA NO

SUBJECT: NORWAY: SAUDI-TRAINED IMAM CLAIMS 9/11 A US ACTION  
AND AL-QAEDA A MYTH

Classified By: DCM Kevin Johnson, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) Imam Zulqarnain Sakandar Madni, leader of a group called 'Norway's United Ulamas,' commented during a net chat on the newspaper Aftenposten's website 12 September that he doubts that Al Qaeda exists, and that 'a good deal of evidence' points to the attacks of 9/11 as being planned by President Bush and his advisors. He went on to say that Osama bin Laden is a fictional figure and questioned the very existence of Al Qaeda. He repeated these claims in a subsequent national television interview. Imam Sakandar's position as the head of an organization of Imams is not without controversy, but he is often quoted in the press and is seen as an important spokesperson for the Muslim community in Norway.

¶2. (SBU) The comments received international attention, and were picked up by UPI and the Washington Post, among others. On 13 September, in Aftenposten, the leader of the Islamic Council in Norway, Mohammad Hamdan, publicly rebuked Sakandar suggesting that the Imam stick to teaching. Nevertheless, Hamdan's arguments were nuanced noting that Osama bin Laden has not been convicted by a court of law. He did not condemn Sakandar's position outright, just his decision to discuss it publicly. The Norwegian media also reached out to the former Bishop of Oslo for his comments, in an effort to provide balance. The media's discomfort with Sakandar's statements was reflected in articles such as the Aftenposten piece titled "Imam On Another Planet." The GON has yet to comment, something we will be asking about as part of an effort to gauge reactions.

¶3. (C) The Norwegian government did deal with Sakandar (among other Imams) when trying to calm the waters following the caricature situation earlier this year. His reputation in the community is mixed, with one Pakistani-Norwegian politician referring to him as 'extremist light,' and an individual who often deals with, and has influence on, young Muslims in his position as an Imam. Sakandar studied Islamic law in Medina.

¶4. (SBU) On September 11, the DCM also took questions in a webchat on 9/11 and the continuing war on terror, getting out our message against terrorism. We are releasing a press statement today countering the misinformation in the Imam's interview. Beyond this, post has developed a multi-pronged program to increase contact with the Muslim and immigrant communities that are growing quickly in Norway. We are expanding our network of contacts in the immigrant community through discussion on integration issues, which is a topical theme of public debate in Norway and gives us a neutral entre into the largely Muslim immigrant populations. We expect this program will increase ties with the Muslim communities in Norway which will improve our ability to address these issues

through education and dialogue at the grass roots level.  
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WHITNEY